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# FROM FRENZIED TO FOCUSED

How School Staffing Models Can Support  
Principals as Instructional Leaders

Executive Summary

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## About the Author



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# INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH AND KEY FINDINGS

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A combination of new and increased demands on U.S. schools today—the alignment of curriculum to new standards, new summative student performance assessments, more rigorous educator evaluation and support systems, and a growing population of students who need extra supports—is raising expectations for public school teachers, and in turn, changing the roles of school leaders.

School principals are increasingly expected to focus on “instructional leadership” by engaging more deeply in areas related to curriculum and instruction, including assessing and developing teacher practice. However, even assuming that principals are comfortable with and capable of taking on these responsibilities, many of the other roles principals have traditionally been responsible for have not yielded to make way for these new demands. Principals are still largely expected to directly manage the non-instructional aspects of their schools as well, including schedules, finances, facilities management, and student safety and discipline, all while maintaining a positive school culture and climate.

How can school systems make principals’ roles more manageable while also ensuring that teachers are receiving the support they need to continue improving classroom instruction for their students? This research explores how and whether including an additional administrator role in high-need schools can bolster principal ability to focus on instructional leadership, particularly by supporting teaching practice. It examines three high-poverty districts of varying sizes, geographies, and demographics which employed promising, yet

varied, “new school leadership” (NSL) models, and which are presented in detail on the following page:

- Council Bluffs Community School District, Council Bluffs, Iowa
- Fitchburg Public Schools, Fitchburg, Massachusetts
- District of Columbia Public Schools, Washington, DC

This research finds the addition of a NSL to be beneficial but not sufficient in helping principals focus on instructional leadership. Several factors influence this finding. First, the breadth of principals’ job responsibilities, including what they view as “instructional leadership” tasks, can make it difficult for them to focus on supporting effective instruction. Second, a principal’s interest and skill in improving teacher practice impacts ability to reap the full benefit of a NSL role. Some focus group principals, particularly more veteran ones, voiced reluctance to delegate certain aspects of the job that they enjoy or see as important to school culture, even if others could easily take on the task (covering cafeteria duty, for example). Third, even when principal preference is to focus on supporting instruction, the addition of the NSL role seems to provide insufficient capacity to help them do so. Both principals and teachers voiced that some school needs, particularly student- and family-climate related ones, are not sufficiently covered by the NSL role. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the question of whether the district conditions are in place to support principals’ capacity to focus on instructional leadership.

## Summary of Districts' New School Leader Models

|                                  | <b>Council Bluffs Community School District</b>   | <b>Fitchburg Public Schools</b>   | <b>District of Columbia Public Schools</b>  |
|----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>NSL Role/ Initiative Name</b> | School Administration Manager (SAM)   | Student Program Support Administrator (SPSA)  | Director or Manager of Strategy & Logistics (DSL/MSL)   |
| <b>Initiative Goal(s)</b>        | Increase principal focus on instruction   | 1) Increase principal focus on instruction;<br>2) Improve special education service delivery  | 1) Increase principal focus on instruction and people management; 2) Allow teachers to focus more time on instruction; 3) Provide more support/career paths to operations staff; 4) Increase school staff morale and retention  |
| <b>Key Responsibilities</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining principal calendar and school schedules</li> <li>• Tracking principal time</li> <li>• Fulfilling supply requests</li> <li>• Overseeing building maintenance</li> <li>• Helping to handle student discipline issues</li> <li>• Organizing assemblies and staff meetings</li> <li>• Serving as liaison to parents</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overseeing all special-education-specific work</li> <li>• Conducting special education teacher and paraprofessional observations and evaluations</li> <li>• Attending grade-level and data team meetings</li> <li>• Facilitating teacher PD</li> <li>• Handling student discipline, as assigned</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overseeing all school operations (managing student information systems, supplies, maintenance issues, budgeting, emergency planning &amp; response, etc.)</li> <li>• Ordering and delivering supplies</li> <li>• Organizing school events</li> <li>• Finding coverage when teachers are absent</li> <li>• Maintaining school calendar</li> </ul> |
| <b>School Admin Team Member?</b> | No*   | Yes   | Yes   |
| <b>New role in schools?</b>      | Yes   | Yes***  | Yes***  |
| <b>Funding Source</b>            | District general funds  | District general funds  | School funds  |
| <b>License required</b>          | Originally none, now SAM license (unique to Iowa)   | Originally teacher, now school administrator  | None  |
| <b>Salary****</b>                | Slightly less than first-year teacher (\$~43,000)   | Same as assistant principal (~\$80,000)   | Varies based on role/experience, similar to teacher with a bachelor's degree and 10–20 years experience (~\$68–98,000)  |
| <b>Supervised by</b>             | Principal   | Principal (and dotted line to district Director of Pupil Services)  | Principal   |
| <b>Supervisor of</b>             | Front office and facilities staff**, paraprofessionals  | Special education teachers and paraprofessionals  | Front office and facilities staff   |

### Legend

\*SAMs are often invited by principals to be part of the building leadership team, along with teachers, to help inform non-instructional decisions, but are not considered by the district or school to be part of the school administration team.

\*\*A district supervisor serves as the formal evaluator for custodial service staff within schools.

\*\*\*A portion of the SPSA role was previously performed by a member of FPS' central office team. Some DCPS principals may have given up another staff position in order to fund the DSL/MSL role in a cost-neutral manner—in some cases, a staff person whose former role was eliminated took on the DSL/MSL role.

\*\*\*\*Information was obtained via focus groups, district administrator interviews, job descriptions, and publicly available websites (e.g., District of Columbia Public Schools, "Compensation and Benefits for Teachers," 2017, <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/compensation-and-benefits-teachers>; Salary.com, "Assistant School Principal Salaries in Fitchburg, Massachusetts," 2017, <http://www1.salary.com/MA/Fitchburg/Assistant-School-Principal-salary.html>).

# CONCLUSIONS

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Overall, these findings continue to raise questions about what the best overall school staffing structures and supports are for ensuring that teachers are receiving the assistance they need to continue improving classroom instruction and environments for their students, and that principals' roles are appropriate and manageable.

These three districts have made a concerted effort to create additional time, and sometimes support, for principals to focus on the instructional leadership aspects of their job. Yet, principals said they still are—and think they should be—held accountable for every aspect of their school's functioning. Most principals in the focus groups said that they view themselves as their school's "instructional leader," but still see their role as ensuring that all of the various areas that impact a school's success—including, but not limited to, instructional leadership—are implemented cohesively to meet their school's larger goals.

Previous research makes the case that unless principals have structures and processes in place to help them reallocate their time, other tasks are likely to crowd out a focus on supporting instruction. On the other hand, several findings from this research, including high levels of turnover of some of the NSLs due to burnout, and reports that possessing formal authority over other staff is important, indicate that processes and supports alone may be insufficient without additional leadership capacity. That is, in order to make the role of principals and other school leaders manageable, and designed in a way that allows

them to focus on improving instruction and other areas key to school success, many schools will require additional staff to share the extensive list of leadership responsibilities, in addition to well-designed processes and supports.

The biggest takeaway from this research is that there is no "silver bullet" model for leadership staffing and roles. Rather, different models may work best depending on the school and district context and the human capital and other resources available. But ultimately, it appears that improving student outcomes in larger, high-need schools will require thinking beyond who fills the role of "instructional leader" and how. Instead, districts should consider all of the various aspects that schools need to address to be successful—instruction, school climate, student academic, behavior, and personal supports—and divide responsibilities in these areas among staff in the most effective manner.

In an ideal world, with more robust financial resources, perhaps larger schools would be structured more like other types of organizations, where senior and mid-level managers would take on a bulk of principals' typical responsibilities (e.g., operations, finance, human resources, information/data, and compliance-oriented tasks) and teacher leaders would act as mid-level managers responsible for providing more frequent, content-specific feedback to teachers on their practice, while the principal role would be closer to that of a CEO. In fact, several charter networks have put systems in place that do something very close to this (see full report for more details).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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The experiences of Council Bluffs Community School District, Fitchburg Public Schools, and District of Columbia Public Schools are informative for other high-need districts considering modifying school leader roles and staffing structures to better support high-quality teaching and learning. Before moving forward with such efforts, districts should perform a careful needs and resource assessment and reflect on whether the ideas they are considering will clearly address the problem(s) that they are trying to fix, without unintended consequences in other areas.

Of course, it is difficult to find one solution that can meet every goal a district has, particularly without clear, intentional supports to do so. As such, districts should determine what their *primary* goal is for including a NSL role, or any other type of distributed leadership role as part of their needs assessment: Is it to have principals focus work directly with teachers more often to improve their practice? To make the role of the principal more manageable and boost principal retention? To meet student and parent needs more quickly? Then districts can determine what supporting processes to put in place to coherently help meet that goal. (See **Key Considerations for States and Districts** on the following page for other important areas to consider.) If the primary goal is improving principal's instructional leadership, most principals will also need assistance developing their level of knowledge and skills, including time management, to undertake this work well, even with additional staff capacity. Some may also benefit from coaching on how to change school norms about what "appropriate work" for principals to be involved in is, and how to build trusting relationships among various staff members

to ensure new roles are implemented smoothly.

Figuring out how to meet various staffing and instructional goals within budgetary constraints was a challenge for the three districts studied here, and will be a challenge for others as well. Fortunately, the current development of state and district plans under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now called the Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA) provides a huge opportunity to move on this option. New flexibilities around using ESSA Title II dollars for evidence-based activities could be one option, along with using Title I funds for school improvement purposes in higher-poverty schools and districts. In addition to strategically funding new leadership roles, states and districts can—and should—use funds to develop sample staffing models for meeting different assessed school needs and goals, along with tools, guidance, and meaningful professional development for principals and their supervisors to support this work. They can also begin to think through whether and how principal job descriptions and evaluation systems may need to change when NSL roles are added to better reflect expectations for the role.

States and districts can help principals move away from overseeing every aspect of their school's success, including directly supervising and developing every staff member, and instead focus on hiring and developing others to support them in fulfilling all of the key aspects of running a successful school.<sup>63</sup> Re-envisioning school staffing in this way can help create school systems that more effectively meet all of students' needs, academic and otherwise, and ultimately improve student outcomes.

## Key Considerations for States and Districts: Ensuring School Leadership Staffing Supports Effective Teaching

1. **Clarify Roles and Responsibilities:** If principals are expected to be instructional leaders, has the district clearly defined the primary responsibilities of that role? How will the district make the role of principals and other school administrators clear so that everyone on staff understands how each member of the administration is, or at least should be, spending his or her time? How will the district balance the need for structure with appropriate levels of flexibility in defining principal, instructional leader, and NSL roles to help ensure desired outcomes are met?
2. **Assess Where Instructional Knowledge Lies:** Are all principals capable of supporting more effective teaching without further development?<sup>i</sup> Is it realistic to expect principals to be sufficiently versed in what high-quality instruction looks like in each grade and subject area they oversee to make a positive impact on instruction? If not, what development opportunities can be offered and/or how can other instructional leaders, such as teacher leaders, be deployed where there are gaps?
3. **Ensure Principal Supervisors Support Role Shifts:** If the expectation is that principals will focus more intently on instructional leadership responsibilities by delegating certain other responsibilities, how will their supervisors support this shift, and how will the district ensure that supervisors are prepared to perform that role? Will principals be evaluated and/or developed any differently (e.g., on their ability to distribute leadership in certain areas that are no longer considered their direct responsibility)?
4. **Align Staffing Choices with School and District Needs/Goals:** Will patching one hole in a school's staffing structure leave a new hole elsewhere? If there is not enough funding available to fill every hole, which positions will be most valuable given the school's and district's needs and goals? Is there one school staffing model that could be effective districtwide, or do school needs vary enough that schools should have some flexibility to determine which positions are most valuable to them?
5. **Consider the Whole Staffing Picture:** How will the district ensure that any new staff roles created are manageable and appropriately compensated, and are not simply shifting responsibilities from an overworked principal to another overworked staff member?<sup>ii</sup> If multiple staff roles are created to address principal capacity (such as teacher leadership and NSL roles), are they designed to complement each other?
6. **Reflect on the District's Enabling Conditions:** How will the district create the conditions and processes to support and sustain new staffing model(s), such as a focus on ensuring a manageable caseload for principals' supervisors?<sup>iii</sup> Will it adopt a national model, such as the National SAM Innovation Project, which offers specific training, coaching, and a host of recommended processes? If it will set up and monitor its own systems and processes, where will the staff and funding come from to do so? If the district will provide schools with the flexibility to develop their own models, how will the district ensure it has the capacity to support this variation?

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<sup>i</sup>Research by the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership has found that "too few leaders charged with leading the improvement of instruction have developed sufficient expertise to identify high-quality teaching and explicate what makes that teaching 'high quality.'" See Center for Educational Leadership, "School and District Leaders as Instructional Experts: What We Are Learning," University of Washington, 2015, [http://info.k-12leadership.org/download-school-and-district-leaders-as-instructional-experts-what-we-are-learning?\\_ga=1.49676004.315053796.1310498529](http://info.k-12leadership.org/download-school-and-district-leaders-as-instructional-experts-what-we-are-learning?_ga=1.49676004.315053796.1310498529).

<sup>ii</sup>In addition to being a finding from New America's focus group research, a recent review of the literature on teacher leadership found the level of demands of the role relative to the time available to dedicate to the responsibilities to be one of the biggest drawbacks. See Julianne A. Wenner and Todd Campbell, "Theoretical and Empirical Basis of Teacher Leadership: A Review of the Literature;" Review of Educational Research 87, no. 1 (February 2017): 134–171; Madeline Will, "There's Now a Body of Research on What It Means to Be a Teacher Leader," Education Week, June 24, 2016, [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching\\_now/2016/06/what\\_does\\_it\\_mean\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_teacher\\_leader.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2016/06/what_does_it_mean_to_be_a_teacher_leader.html)).

<sup>iii</sup>For further reading on this topic, see Gina Ikemoto, Lori Taliaferro, and Benjamin Fenton, Great Principals at Scale: Creating District Conditions that Enable All Principals to be Effective (New York: New Leaders, June 2014), <http://newleaders.org/research-policy/great-principals-at-scale/>; Center for Educational Leadership, "Principal Support Framework," University of Washington, 2015, <http://info.k-12leadership.org/principal-support-framework>.

